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Buddy Holly (courtesy Buddy Holly Memorial Society)

buddy holly: the iowa connection

by kathryn helene

Growing up in the 1950s has been variously described as bland, calamitous, homogeneous, and confusing. It was a time characterized by the Cold War, Joseph McCarthy, *Brown v. Board of Education*, likeable Ike, and the emergence of rock 'n' roll.

Buddy Holly — singer, songwriter, and consummate musician — was a key figure in the transformation of country music and rhythm-and-blues into the phenomenon of rock 'n' roll. His tragic death by plane crash in the midst of an Iowa blizzard was memorialized in Don McLean's "American Pie" as "the day the music died." Yet his meteoric career, which included such hits as "That'll Be the Day" and "Peggy Sue," spanned only seventeen months. Musicians as diverse as Paul McCartney and Waylon Jennings have acknowledged a tremendous debt to the music of Buddy Holly. But to his ardent fans — especially those in the Midwest and in Great Britain, where Buddy Holly and the Crickets toured — he is a living presence.

Although his contribution to rock 'n' roll music and its progeny is undisputed, the ori-

gins of Buddy's own musical style are often debated. Born Charles Hardin Holley in Lubbock, Texas in 1936, Buddy began taking piano lessons at age eleven. Both of his older brothers played the guitar, and before long Buddy requested his own. Guitars took center stage at the frequent live music jamborees in western Texas. Although Lubbock also boasted a well-attended symphony orchestra, bluegrass music — which Buddy loved for its fast, driving rhythms — was a popular, if less respectable, musical style.

While still in junior high school, Buddy met Bob Montgomery, who shared his affection for bluegrass. The two boys used Buddy's parents' living room as a studio and practiced their guitar music from school's end until midnight. Their perseverance did not go unrewarded; they were applauded enthusiastically when they

performed at school functions. In 1953, when Buddy was seventeen, the duo was offered a spot on Lubbock's pop-music station, KDAV.

Buddy and Bob performed primarily country duets for KDAV. They were influenced by the music of Hank Williams. Buddy idolized the country star and adapted Williams' famous yodeling technique into his own inimitable "hiccup." Some music historians describe the music of the "Buddy and Bob Show" as being influenced by the "Tex-Mex" sound. But, despite the geographical proximity of Mexico, there is no evidence to indicate that either Buddy or Bob was actually exposed to this music.

John Goldrosen, author of a biography of Holly, discredits the persistent myth that Elvis Presley was Buddy's most significant influence. It is true that Elvis was booked into Lubbock as early as 1955. Lubbock teenagers, however, gave him a lukewarm reception. The story that Buddy Holly was inspired to leap onto the stage while Elvis was performing is apocryphal, but Buddy did acknowledge a certain fascination for Elvis, who is recognized as the first major performer to assimilate rhythm-and-blues into country music. A recent interview with Bob Montgomery, however, confirmed that in his early days Buddy was primarily attracted to the "pure blues" sung by urban black performers like Lightning Hopkins, Muddy Waters, and Howling Wolf. Buddy listened avidly to the rhythm-and-blues radio station just outside Lubbock. His attraction to rhythm-and-blues coalesced with his immersion in bluegrass and country music. This resulted in the classic "rockabilly" style for which Buddy Holly is famous and from which rock 'n' roll evolved.

The "Buddy and Bob Show" expanded numerically and musically in 1955 to include drummer Jerry Allison, another young Lubbock musician who echoed Buddy's growing appreciation for rock 'n' roll music. Sonny Curtis, a local guitarist, also joined the group. Hol-



Buddy Holly, with Joe B. Mauldin (one of the original Crickets)

ly's band performed locally for small fees, and also performed as far away as Dallas and New Mexico.

Jim Denny, an agent from Decca Records, saw Buddy perform and offered him a five-year contract with a one year renewal provision. Only one of the Crickets, Sonny Curtis, accompanied Buddy to Nashville. Unfortunately, the entire experience was dismal. Decca wanted a new Elvis, but they were doubtful about Buddy filling the bill. Buddy himself was ill at ease with Decca's studio musicians, who seemed



rickets) on bass (courtesy Buddy Holly Memorial

ground in composing Broadway and film music. His studio was unique musically as well as geographically. Instead of charging musicians studio time by the hour, he charged by the finished product, which encouraged musicians like Buddy Holly to refine and polish their songs.

Within a year of cutting "That'll Be the Day" at Clovis, the song became a certifiable hit. (Actually, this was the second version; the first had been recorded and released by Decca to mediocre response.) Buddy Holly and the Crickets waited out the year, making several more records at Clovis and practicing together day and night. It was at this time that they concocted the name "The Chirping Crickets," and decided to release their singles under the names of both "Buddy Holly" and "Buddy Holly and the Chirping Crickets" in order to increase their sales. By the end of 1957, with "That'll Be the Day" soaring on the charts, Buddy Holly and the Crickets were on their way.

Single hit records, without the follow-up exposure of tours or television, do not guarantee a successful career in the world of rock music even today, and in the 1950s tours were particularly essential. Television was in its infancy, video tapes of concerts would have seemed as far-fetched as a walk on the moon. Anyone familiar only with the touring practices of current rock stars — who fly in their personal luxury jets to major cities for one-hour concerts at fees of upwards of \$500,000 — would be surprised at the conditions characteristic of the late 1950s. Travel was almost exclusively by bus. Shows were often booked on consecutive dates, with several hundred miles of driving between stops. Instead of being booked as the "feature" group or solo artist for their own concerts, musicians of the '50s were booked as part of larger group ventures, with show titles like "The Big Beat," or "The Winter Dance Party,"

hostile to the new sound of rock 'n' roll.

When the first year of the contract ended, Decca exercised its option to terminate the contract, so Buddy, Sonny Curtis, and Jerry Allison left Nashville and travelled to Clovis, New Mexico to make "demos" at Norman Petty's studio. After their first two recording sessions, they were joined by Joe B. Mauldin. The close-knit father/son relationship that Buddy formed with Norman Petty continued throughout his brief career. Petty was an organist and pianist with a moderately successful back-

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or simply, as in the case of a concert sponsored by the General Artists Corporation, "The GAC Show." Fees paid to performers were small to moderate. Reputedly, Buddy Holly never received more than a thousand dollars for a single performance; his customary fee when he performed with the Crickets was \$400, and the fee was split three or four ways.

Nonetheless, Holly and the Crickets toured extensively. The royalties they received from their records went to their manager, studio owner Norman Petty. Petty's fatherly concern for the four young men just out of their teens led him to dole out their money to them in small amounts, to avoid extravagance. One way to circumvent Petty's money management was to book the tours.

but the most important motivation for touring was the public exposure and experience of performing live. As early as 1956, when he was under contract to Decca, Buddy made arrangements to join two different package tours travelling outside Nashville. His next tour came after he and the Crickets signed with Brunswick and Coral Records in March 1957. That fall the group was signed by the General Artists Corporation for an eighty-day cross-country tour called "The Biggest Show of Stars for 1957." The show included the Everly Brothers, but was centered around such black stars as Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, and Frankie Lymon. The Crickets played two or three of their tunes each night in all but four of the fifty states, including Iowa, on this tour. The price of admission was generally from two to three dollars.

In December 1957 Buddy Holly and the Crickets made their first television appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, performing their second major hit song, "Peggy Sue." They were featured again just two months later, but a series of mishaps and misunderstandings during the show made the group resistant to subse-

quent television engagements. Early in 1958 they accepted a five-day Australian tour, with a stopover in Hawaii, on which they were accompanied by Jerry Lee Lewis and Paul Anka. Their teenaged audiences were wildly receptive, though the adult critics were less enthusiastic. One Hawaiian reviewer who was surprised at the energetic audience response commented, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "We were listening very attentively, but that availed us of little reason to be complimentary."

Buddy and the Crickets accepted a four-week British package tour at the end of the Australian tour, and this time the group was well-received by the critics. They especially praised the Crickets' in-person sound as being nearly parallel in quality to that of their records.

But the Midwest tours brought Buddy Holly

ALL IN PERSON! **ALAN FREED** ★
presents
"The BIG BEAT" ★

Jerry Lee LEWIS and his band

Buddy HOLLY	• The CRICKETS
Chuck BERRY	• Frankie LYMON
• The DIAMONDS	• DANNY and the JUNIORS
• BILLY and LILLIE	• Screamin' JAY HAWKINS
• BILLY FORD and the Thunderbirds	• The PASTELS
• The CHANTELS	• Jo ANN CAMPBELL
• DICKY DOO and the DONT'S	• ALAN FREED and his Big Rockin' Coral Record Band
• Larry WILLIAMS and his orchestra	• with Sam "the Man" Taylor

★ **17 ACTS** including **4 BANDS** ★
and others

WATERLOO - HIPPODROME
TUES., APRIL 22 - 8:15 P. M.
—ONLY DATE IN IOWA!—

Newspaper advertisement for a Holly concert in Iowa (courtesy George Horton)



Iowa teenagers rock 'n' roll in the 1950s (SHSI)

and the Crickets their most enraptured reception. The response of the audience led promoters in the 1950s to describe the Midwest, according to John Goldrosen, as "prime territory for rock 'n' roll stage shows. Even the small Midwestern towns of 25,000 to 100,000 had large ballrooms which were usually filled by crowds wholly out of proportion to the size of the local population." Among the midwestern stops, Iowa towns stood out for both attendance and enthusiasm. As early as November 4, 1957 Buddy Holly and the Crickets performed in Omaha and Council Bluffs. They returned on April 20, 1958 and began their most extensive Midwest tour, playing twice in Waterloo at the Electric Park Ballroom and then performing at Decorah's Matters Ballroom and Oelwein's National Guard Armory during the summer.

CLEAR LAKE IOWA

THE FINEST BANDS

Surf

THE FINEST PEOPLE

Fri., Jan. 30th
MIDWEST CARAVAN

Sat., Jan. 31st
RAY LEWIS
And His Orchestra

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 2nd — DANCING 8 TO 12 P. M.

WINTER DANCE PARTY

BUDDY HOLLY
AND THE
CRICKETS
"PEGGY SUE"

BIG BOPPER
"CHANTILLY LACE"

THESE TOP RECORDING STARS IN PERSON

FRANKIE SARDO
"I WONDER WHY"

DION AND THE BELMONTs
"DONNA"
"COME ON, LET'S GO"

RITCHIE VALENS
"DONNA"
"COME ON, LET'S GO"

Extra Attraction **FRANKIE SARDO** **Now Hop "TAKE-OUT"**

For Ages 12 to 21. This All-Star Cast
Bob Hale to M.C. & Spin Records. Adm. \$1.25; Checking 10c

Newspaper ad for Holly's last concert (courtesy George Horton)

"The Big Beat Tour," an Alan Freed-sponsored show that featured Buddy Holly, the Crickets, Jerry Lee Lewis, and other stars in a two-and-a-half-hour performance, was vividly described the following day by a staff writer for the *Waterloo Courier*:

Jerry Lee Lewis didn't show up . . . but the 4,200 rock 'n' roll fans attending didn't care, because the rest of the troupe made enough noise to make up for him . . . Dickey Doo and the Don'ts did a good job on the stage, and Dickey himself didn't do badly behind the stage, either. He clobbered some over-anxious spectator on the jaw earlier in the evening. An incident of hair-pulling, lots of dancing in the aisles and other shenanigans were reported, but no one was hurt.

The article illustrates a classic split over rock 'n' roll music that existed between adults and teenagers throughout the country. George Horton, a Buddy Holly fan from Conesville, Iowa and a teenager in the 1950s, describes the appeal of early rock 'n' roll music, especially that of Buddy Holly:

The 1950s was the first generation of teenagers who had their own music. Since many of our mothers had worked during the war, we grew up more independent. Rock 'n' roll music was rebellious; it said something to us as teenagers. Buddy Holly's songs were clean and crisp; they reached into the audience. As a performer, Buddy could levitate kids out of their seats!

Iowa teenagers, whose severe Mohawk haircuts, sweat socks, and tennis shoes created a '50s look for their age group, gravitated to the new music they could call their own. But it was the new buying power of teenagers that captivated the record industry.

don Bell was a prominent disk jockey for KRNT, a middle-of-the-road radio station in Des Moines, when he decided to take a vacation in California to investigate the new rock 'n' roll music. Music promoters convinced him that national record sales showed a strong trend toward rock 'n' roll. "It was business, pure business," Bell claimed, "that convinced me to bring rock 'n' roll to Iowa." KRNT apparently didn't adapt well to the new music, so Bell moved over to KIOA in Des Moines, a Top-40 station where he became "the voice of rock 'n' roll." Iowa listeners confirm the ascendancy of KIOA. Teenagers listened to KIOA's continuous rock 'n' roll music in their cars for hours on end. "Cruising" or "doing the ones" (driving down one-way streets with radios blaring) became the arche-

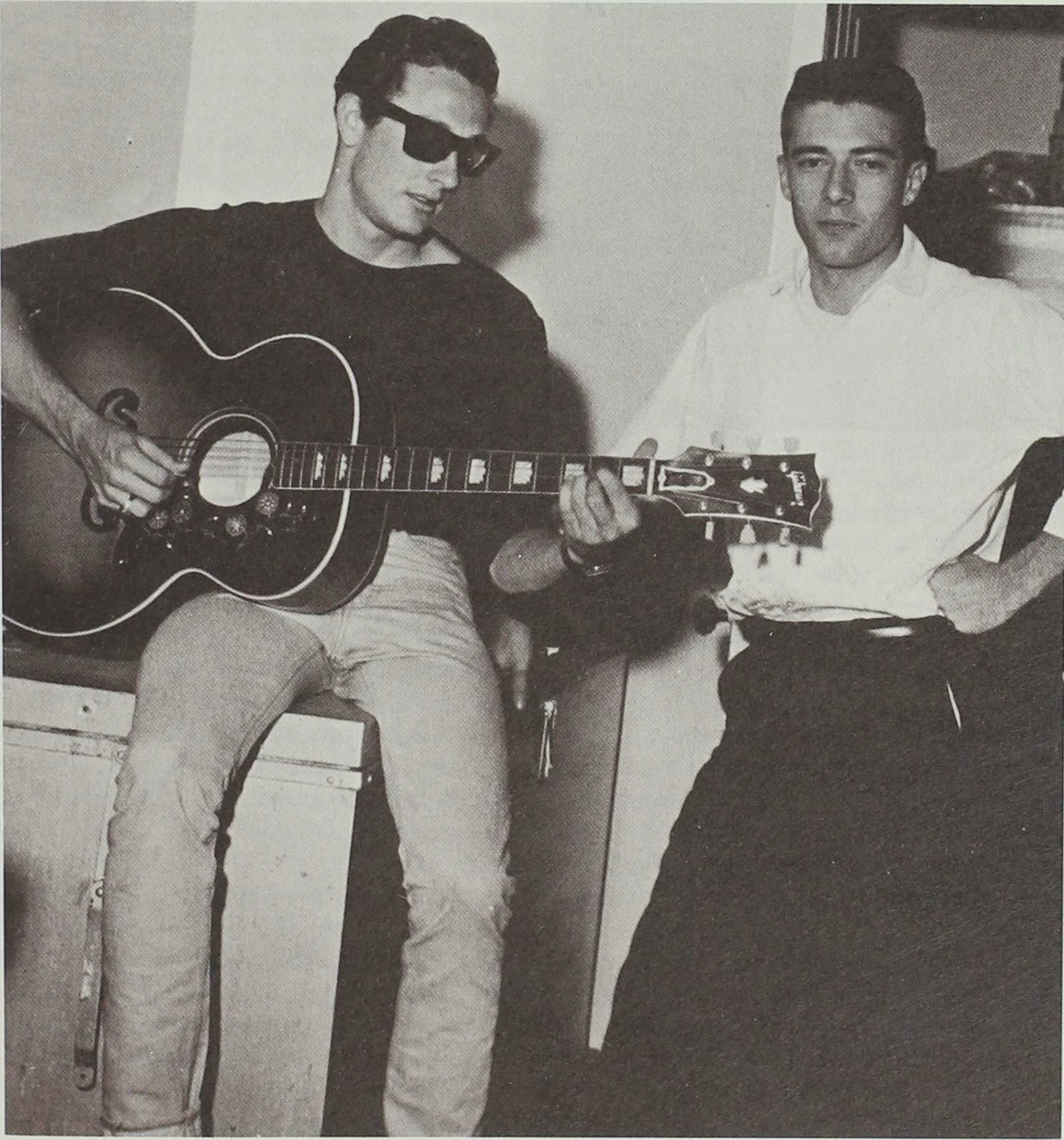
typal teenage activity of the 1950s.

A series of articles that appeared in the *Waterloo Courier* in February 1959 described the "Revolution in Music." The initial article established, to no one's great surprise, that teenagers "dominated popular music. Conventional artists like Pat Boone and Cole Porter are hurt by the revolution." The third article sharply criticized teenagers' taste in music: "Kids will learn to like bad music if they hear it long enough." One disk jockey, who was interviewed for the article, asked rhetorically, "When will the kids' taste in music get better? When we make this a better world for them to live in."

the controversy over rock 'n' roll was heightened by the new label of "teenager." This demarcation facilitated an unprecedented scrutiny of young people by the media. Following the highly publicized murders by nineteen-year-old Charles Starkweather and his fourteen-year-old girlfriend, editorials from newspapers such as the *Des Moines Register* called for curfews on juveniles. "Teenager" became synonymous with "juvenile delinquent." Movies of the 1950s — such as "The Cool and the Crazy," billed as "seven savage punks on a weekend of violence" — capitalized on adult fears, even as they provided a certain sought-after identity for teenagers.

It was easy to make the tie-in to rock 'n' roll music. Teenagers responded to their new music with thunderous enthusiasm. Joe B. Mauldin, one of the original Crickets who toured the Midwest with Buddy Holly, described the response of their audience during a typical tour stop: "I was lucky to be miked. Without a mike, the sound of my bass would never have been heard over all the screaming and yelling."

A less typical live performance of Alan Freed's "Big Beat Rock 'n' Roll Show," given in



Buddy Holly, with guitar, and Waterloo bandleader Eddie Randall backstage at the Electric Park Ballroom (courtesy Eddie Randall)

Boston on May 3, 1958, was subsequently reported as a "rock 'n' riot." During the performance several minor incidents occurred, involving eager fans who tried to climb onto the stage. Afterwards, outside the Boston Arena, several persons were reported to have been

"stabbed, slugged, beaten or robbed by berserk gangs of teenaged boys and girls."

The ensuing storm of protest increased the number and intensity of newspaper editorials critical of teenagers, but this time the young people spoke out in their own defense. In an



Iowa teenagers from Columbus Junction High School were expelled for their Mohawk haircuts in 1959. (courtesy George Horton)

editorial reply to the *Waterloo Courier* on May 12, 1958, local teenagers queried:

We would like to know how a certain kind of music can make a person stab another human being. It's unfair to blame the music. Our favorites, like Rick Nelson, Paul Anka and countless others, are clean and offer a decent type of entertainment.

Although he did not make these teenagers' list, Buddy Holly received a better rating than rock 'n' rollers like Jerry Lee Lewis — whose chaotic on-stage performance was only surpassed by the public's hysterical response to his marriage to his fourteen-year-old cousin. By contrast, Buddy was gentlemanly. His glasses, which were incongruous at the time for any stage performer, created a subsequent fad for on-stage spectacles and gave him a certain aura of clean-cut respectability. Norman Petty, his manager, persuaded Buddy and the Crickets (who favored jeans off-stage) to wear suits when they toured. Waterloo bandleader Eddie Randall, of Eddie and the Downbeats, opened the July 8, 1958 performance of Buddy Holly and

the Crickets at the Electric Park Ballroom. He remembers Buddy Holly as a "quiet individual, very honest and sincere," and "never without a tie."

buddy's music was not immune to criticism. One of his songs, "Rave On," a sweet, self-mocking little love song, was labeled by an anti-rock 'n' roll radio station as "music to steal hubcaps by." Fortunately, Iowa teenagers found other reasons to appreciate Buddy's music. Eddie Randall confirms that Buddy's Iowa appearances "always had a packed house." Jim Dalton, currently a disk jockey for WMT in Cedar Rapids, attended one of Buddy's midwestern performances and admits to being

mesmerized by his appearance. He was not a showman, per se. He was not flamboyant, but he sang from his heart. He had charisma. He had the audience jumping up and down for his up-beat tunes and sitting in rapt silence for his moody love songs.

Dalton's remarks are echoed by several people who attended the ill-fated last concert in Clear Lake, Iowa on February 2, 1959. Carroll Anderson, then manager of the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, remembered trying to make Holly and the other members of the multi-act "Winter Dance Party" feel at home. He was particularly sympathetic to the musicians as travellers whose one-night stops were separated by several hundred miles of driving. The disk jockey for the Surf Ballroom that night was Bob Hale, who recalled that Buddy's last performance was attended by "the largest crowd ever at the Surf." Daniel Dougherty, one of the 1500 rock 'n' roll fans who paid the \$1.25 admission to see the "Winter Dance Party," remembered that "there was not too much dancing while Buddy was playing."

the Clear Lake concert was wedged between two performances on February 1 in Appleton and Green Bay, Wisconsin and a performance scheduled for February 3 in Moorhead, Minnesota, 430 miles to the west. Repeated mechanical breakdowns of the bus, including its heating system, and a suitcase full of costumes that needed to be cleaned before the concert in Moorhead, prompted Buddy Holly and two other musicians on the tour (Ritchie Valens and J.P. Richardson) to charter a private plane. All four occupants of the plane were killed instantly when it crashed about ten minutes after taking off from the tiny airfield. The crash was attributed to severe cold, snow, and perhaps pilot error.

nearly every Iowa newspaper carried the story of the plane crash as its front-page headline, but instead of sending one of their own reporters to write an individual report, most papers chose to use the available UPI story. Although the use of wire stories is hardly unusual, such a decision may have reflected a lack of knowledge of or interest in the rock 'n' roll music of Buddy Holly. Only the Clear Lake *Mirror-Reporter* provided a personal angle and a certain affirmation of the musicians and their audience at the Surf Ballroom:

There was no fearful omen of tragedy [during this last performance]. The entertainers were full of pep, reacting joyously to the big crowd of young people.

Four years ago, Iowa fans initiated an annual memorial concert at Clear Lake's Surf Ballroom on the first weekend in February. Each year the number of people attending increases. *Reminiscing* (the Journal of the Buddy Holly Memorial Society) links Iowa fans with his many fans throughout the nation, and to the British Buddy Holly Society as well. *The Bud-*

dy Holly Story, the 1975 movie starring Gary Busey, appears to have crystalized the feelings of isolated fans of Buddy and his music into a movement that credits him with originating rock 'n' roll. Iowans like Jim Dalton insist that most people who grew up on Buddy's music have always expressed their appreciation strongly. "His music grabbed us," Dalton maintains. "It still does. You can tell he had fun with his music, and we do, too."

more than twenty years after his tragic death at the age of twenty-two, Buddy Holly is the distillation of contradictions. He was a young man whose thick glasses and conservative suit belied the exuberance and irony of his unusual voice. His songwriting is staggeringly prolific in view of his age. His willingness to experiment and enlarge upon his own experiences is astonishing. (At his death, for example, plans were discovered to produce an album of Ray Charles songs and to delve more deeply into the Spanish music his wife introduced him to.) Juxtaposed with such rock 'n' roll originals as Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly carved out a unique niche in rock 'n' roll history. His music and the devotion of his fans assure his immortality. □

Note on Sources

The following published works were used in the preparation of this article: John Goldrosen, *Buddy Holly: His Life and Music* (Bowling Green, O.: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975); Dave Laing, *Buddy Holly* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); Lillian Roxon's *Rock Encyclopedia* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971); Arnold Shaw, *The Rockin' '50s: The Decade That Transformed the Pop Music Scene* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1974); "An Exclusive 'Reminiscing' Interview with Eddie Randall," *Reminiscing: The Official Journal of the Buddy Holly Memorial Society*, No. 22 (March 1982), 15-17; and William J. Bush, "Buddy Holly: The Legend and Legacy," *Guitar Player*, June 1982, pp. 64-66, 74-82, 86. Research materials for the article also included personal interviews with Don Bell, Jim Dalton, George Horton, and Eddie Randall, and a collection of Buddy Holly memorabilia in the possession of George Horton.